Dialogue on Inclusion: Does the Internet represent diverse voices? Perspectives from gender, linguistic and marginalized communities - December 19, 2021

Brinda Dash

Hello everyone and a very warm welcome to our organizers, panelists and audience. Thank you so much for being here on a Sunday morning. Before I start, I wanted to inform the panelists and the audience that this discussion is being live streamed and recorded. Purnima would you please drop in the link for the live stream so that we can share it around? Thank you so much. My name is Brinda Dash and I've been volunteering in the Internet governance space for over a year now. Being a former teacher in a government school through the Teach for India fellowship, I wish to equip myself with the knowledge and skills required to create an impact and shape the future of the Internet. We really appreciate your enthusiasm to be a part of a panel discussion titled dialogue on digital inclusion. The Internet represent diverse voices being organized by the Internet Society, Hyderabad chapter, Internet Society Chennai chapter and Youth IGF India.

Internet United was the overarching theme chosen for the 16th Internet Governance Forum held from December 6 to 10th in a hybrid format. The Internet Governance Forum is a global multi stakeholder platform that brings stakeholders together to discuss public policy issues related to the Internet. The overarching theme Internet, United envisions the Internet connecting all its users

into one community responsible for the shape and functioning our shared dreams, ideas, needs and actions. Are what shapes the Internet of the future.

This dialogue today on digital inclusion is taking the conversation forward from the discussions at the Internet Governance Forum to highlight and discuss crucial sub themes under the broader umbrella of digital inclusion with an attempt to explore if the Internet is rarely inclusive in reality through the lenses of various socio economic groups, such as the women, LGBTQ community, persons with disabilities, rural communities, different linguistic communities and marginalized political groups.

A few housekeeping rules before we begin. Throughout the webinar, we will be adhering to the Internet Society code of conduct which is shared with the email yesterday. We have a question and answer session towards the end of the panel discussion. To ask your question, you can either raise your hand or post it on the chat window. We'll make a note of it and share it with our moderator. Please keep the chat window active. Your inputs are valuable in shaping this discussion.

For social media promotions, we encourage you to spread the word on social media platforms Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, kindly use the hashtag while promoting hashtag #Internet4all hashtag #digitalinclusion. You can tag us along in your post on Twitter, and I'll leave the user names in the chat. I'll also be tweeting live about the panel discussion from my personal handles.

Moving on. I'd like to now introduce Adarsh, our moderator for the session. recognized as one of the top eight IoT thought leaders of India for his contribution towards the advancement of Internet of Things. Adarsh has more than nine years of experience in core wireless technologies and is currently early business analyst at the Center of Excellence for Internet of Things with the happiest minds technology. He is the president of global Internet Society Rural Development Special Interest Group, and the Joint Secretary of the Internet Society had the bad chapter with this intensive background and experiences in the domain of Internet governance. I'm sure he'll do justice in moderating today's panel discussion successfully without any further delay and now hand over the floor to Adarsh. Over to you.

Adarsh BU
 Everyone, good morning to one and all. Thank you, Brinda, for introducing me and it's my pleasure actually to moderate this wonderful panel on this especially amazing topic. I extend a warm welcome you all to this session on the Dialogue on Inclusion. Does the Internet represent

diverse voices? Thank you so much for investing your time with us, and for the next one and a half hour on this warm Sunday morning.

Adarsh BU
I would like to start with our keynote speaker. Today we have a wonderful, amazing person, Sudha Bhuvaneswari. Sudha Bhuvaneswari is chair of an ISOC India Chennai chapter, so it is an honor for me to welcome Ms Sudha Bhuvaneswari on behalf of the event hosting team and organization. She's in academia, and also is an research supervisor with a specialization in networking with the work experience of more than 20 years, and greatly involved and committed to contribute to the Internet governance, and to serve the community. She's actively involved in the Asia Pacific Regional Internet Governance Forum, Indian School of Internet Governance, APNIC committee, and many more, and even I had the amazing experience of working with Sudha Bhuvaneswari, with a lot of experience, was able to give me a lot of advice. So, all my ears to Sudha Bhuvaneswari, over to you, Madam.

Sudha Bhuvaneswari
Thank you for the introduction. I'm really happy to join you all today, and also very happy to see there are participants on a Sunday morning. We are hoping for a very fruitful session in our discussion today. So, a good morning to all, and I'm very happy to welcome all the participants today for the panel discussion on Dialogue on Inclusion. Does the Internet represent diverse voices? supported by the Internet Society Hyderabad and Chennai chapter, and the Youth IGF of India.

The Internet Society, as you know, is a non profit organization established in 1992, and it's a global cause-related organization which works towards building technical standards, education and capacity building, as well as public policy. So, the Internet Society's mission is that Internet is for everybody, its mission is to promote and the development of the Internet as a global technical infrastructure and as a resource to enrich people's lives are a force for good in society. Internet United was a thematic chosen for the 16th Internet Governance Forum, as Brinda was telling, and taking the conversation forward. This is actually an attempt to explore if the Internet is really inclusive to the edges of various communities.

Being on the Internet provides very endless opportunities for everyone to explore, and the true potential of Internet was realized through the landmark events of the Arab Spring, which saw digital activism officially come into existence, and the key participants in the Tunisian national dialogue received a Nobel Peace Prize for 2015 for its decisive contribution to democracy in Tunisia. The Internet has recomposed the public sphere, and this includes public sphere

participants making their debate in digital spaces. This has led to the creation of fractured spaces where the ideals of transparency trust, decentralization and non discrimination is contrasted with the realities of speech, fake news, trolling, and cyberbullying.

This program mainly aims to build a diverse and inclusive panel to highlight and discuss crucial subthemes under the broader umbrella of digital inclusion, and through this dialogue, our aim is to get the audience to engage the esteemed speakers and understand the barriers to creating an inclusive Internet, and there are many topics covered during the discussion, like gender, digital divide, linguistic diversity, political voices in online spaces, inclusion, digital rights, digital inclusion of rural India, and many more.

I take this opportunity to congratulate the efforts taken up by Ms Brinda and Ms Purnima to organize this discussion on the hottest topic of digital inclusion, and special thanks to Mr Adarsh for moderating this.

Adarsh BU
Thank you so much, Sudha Bhuvaneswari, for your words. We have a big list of panelists, the wonderful speakers with us to discuss on Dialogue on Inclusion: Does the Internet represent diverse voices?

So, when I was going through the governance and all, a lot of stuff I used to hear, as I'm basically a technical person -- if I look into that, for the nation, for the country, like in India, so gender? Digital divide? There is an Indian gender digital divide. The absence of digital access is leaving people behind in the COVID-19 situation, as in the aspect of transforming the digital divide into digital inclusion, for even families with low income, or others in the rural perspective, rural population, as industry, and even the disabled and trans communities, have found themselves on the wrong side of the digital divide. That is thet case, or it could come up. So, these are the things I have in mind whenever I go through any of the topics, or these kind of topics will come up.

So, anyhow, we have a wonderful panel here. It's my pleasure now to introduce each panelist. First, I would like to welcome Divyaa Gupta. Divyaa Gupta is an independent consultant with over five years of experience in working on the issue of gender and development. In the course of our professional journey, she has done focused programmatic research and various organization on the subjects of commercial sex and human trafficking, gender and sanitation, and educational reformation of young inmates imprisoned for crimes against women in Tihar Jail. Currently, she is working as a research and advocacy consultant with organizations that aim to promote women in

non-traditional livelihoods in transportation and construction industries. So, Ms Divyaa Gupta, a warm welcome to you to the session.

Next panelist I would like to welcome is Sameer Nair. Sameer Nair heads one of the flagship programs of Youth4Jobs Foundation, which focuses on skilling and linking less educated youth with disabilities in sustainable livelihoods across India. Have partnered with more than 980 + corporates across India to place youth with disabilities in various roles. With vision of providing job to youth nearer to their homes he along with the team are constantly doing local market scan to create job opportunities for youth. Currently, with presence in 32 states across India, he has trained and placed 29000+ youth mostly from remote villages in India. I really appreciate that one, Mr Sameer Nair. So, please welcome to the session.

The next one, we have is Ritushree. Ritushree is a Transgender woman, Lawyer, DE&I professional, and India's First Transgender Woman Stand-up Comedian. She is also the Co-founder of The Outcast Collective, a DE&I and POSH consulting firm. She is a queer rights activist, corporate speaker and writes articles on various platforms on issues concerning LGBTQIA+ community. So a warm welcome to Ritushree.

The next I would like to introduce is Savita Muley. Savita Muley has spent close to 20 years on the cusp of business and technology, of which 18 years were in mainstream products, technology and management consulting across 5 countries. She is now pursuing her passion to use technology for good & has been driving Products & tech at Haqdarshak for the past 1.5+ yrs. focusing on building solutions for low income, low literacy populations in India.

The next one that I would like to introduce is Meena Kotwal. Meena Kotwal is a dalit journalist and founding editor of 'The Mooknayak', a YouTube channel and Web Portal. She has worked with BBC Hindi in Delhi; India as a Broadcast Journalist She is lives in Delhi. Her stories largely advocate for dalits (under privileged community), Muslims and women rights. She writes for various newspapers and portals regularly. Through her work, she is actively raising awareness on dalit and women issues through twitter where she holds massive influence with 99.5k followers currently. So, Meena Kotwal, welcome to the session as well.

The next one I would like to welcome is Vidushi Kapoor. Vidushi Kapoor graduated from Lady Shri Ram College, New Delhi with an Honors degree in Economics. After working with Ernst & Young and Goldman Sachs, her deep interest in Indian languages combined with a passion to solve complex problems, led her to join hands with veterans in the language technology space to co-found Process9. Nine years into the industry, she has helped build products & solutions for the

localization industry, and has learnt to read and speak many new languages along the way. She has spoken in forums hosted by FICCI, CITLoB and others. So, I understand that in a country like India with multiple languages, which were very important, so great to kno Vidushi Kapoor, and welcome to the session.

The next one I would like to take up is Shruti Shreya. Shruti Shreya is a lawyer by training and a Senior Research Associate at a Delhi based Tech Policy Think Tank called The Dialogue where she leads the vertical on Platform Regulation. Shruti's primary areas of research include intermediary liability, content moderation & freedom of expression. Yeah, freedom of expression is a term which always grabbed me, so Shruti Shreya, gladly welcome, again, for you, for the session.

And our last panel member, Bhuvana Meenakshi. Bhuvana Meenakshi Koteeswaran is a Socio-tech Researcher, Mozillian, Wikimedian, and VRAR/ multidimensional space enthusiast. She is one of the recipients of the ShuttleWorth Flash Grant awards 2021. Bhuvana initiated the Women In Tech community in India to enable more voices of women who are interested in pursuing a career in tech. She is the co-founder of EmergeAbility, an initiative to make the digital world inclusive and accessible technology for NeuroDiverse communities. She has also facilitated global events like MozFest, and Hack4OpenGLAM. Yeah, this is wonderful stuff, and I would like to heartily congratulate you for an Shuttleworth Flash Grant Award of 2021 from our side. A hearty welcome to you, Bhuvana Meenakshi, for the session.

By looking into these profiles, I really feel like a great panel we have here today. Wonderful profiles. A lot of experience in the diversified areas we have here with us today for the session to talk about linguistic diversity and multiculturalism of the Internet, or expertise from the political voices prospect in the online space, as well as inclusion of persons with disabilities. We have a lot of discussions related to Internet, are we missing that disability persons in the discussions, to understand their requirements? And digital rights in the LGBTQ+ communities. I agree completely with that one, what are all the aspects is going on? And, is the digital freedom of LGBT an issue? Are the technology policies and regulations supporting in these aspects, has to be considered. And also, much more to understand from the wonderful panel.

I have a sequence of inquiries here for the speakers I would like to ask. 1) Do you think Internet is currently inclusive? Does it represent voices from diverse communities?   2) According to you, what are the key challenges in making internet a more inclusive space?   3) In your opinion, what could be the solution framework to make online space more inclusive? Any policy measures/intervention that the govt/private companies etc. can take up to help the said

community in navigating through Internet. This is what we'd like to hear from you all. So. your words your experience will give a lot of insights for us.

First, I would like to go and to discuss related to this one, on the gender digital divide experience, from Divyaa Gupta. So, what's your points with respect to this? I'm very much interested to hear from you. Over to you, Divyaa Gupta.

Divyaa Gupta
Hi. Thank you so much for the introduction, and it's wonderful to be a part of this diverse panel today. The question, is Internet currently inclusive, starts with asking the question, who is using the Internet? There is a massive gender divide which is visible, which actually got widened during the COVID. We saw a lot of girls drop out of schools, we saw a lot of women lose jobs, when things went digital, it disproportionately impacted women who are mostly employed in the informal sector. It mostly affected girls who couldn't access the digital resources to educate themselves at home.

So, what are the major reasons why there is this access gap? When we look at the discrimination at the intra-household level, especially in terms of access to resources, a boys education is preferred over s girl's education, especially, and it gets widened with the rural urban divide. Families in rural areas, with limited resources, would prefer their boys' education over the girls' education. so they get left out of opportunities their.

Women who do not know how to leverage platforms, social platforms, digital platforms to gain economic opportunities, they lose out on jobs, they lose out on opportunities there.

There's this wider mindset, which we also saw recently, in the UP's Women Commission, that there was a comment that if girls are given one, they'll run away with boys from different castes. So, there is this mindset that girls should not be given phones because they will get spoiled. It's a big mindset, which is actually leading to this gap in access to digital resources this gender divide. Obviously, women and girls are 15% less likely to own a phone, and 33% less likely to use Internet services on it. In Asia Pacific countries. India has the widest gap in access to resources.

So, yeah, I think a lot of these challenges need to be identified. Internet is a powerful medium for organizing a women's movement, and we saw that during the #MeToo campaign, women from all over the world were able to raise voices against sexual harassment. But, again, who got missed out? It was the women from marginalized communities, it did not represent the voices of Dalit and tribal women.

And this gap, it widens with caste, with the rural/urban divide, and I think it is important to understand how this divide in access to Internet resources, on the basis of caste, on the basis of whether people are deciding, is important in forming policy decisions. For that we need to have gender disaggregated data on how this divide widens with more levels of marginalization.

Having worked with women on their skill development, I've seen stories where women who were not able to access, who did not have phones, or did not know how to use phones, when they got connected to skill development platforms, and given mandatory digital literacy, were able to actually negotiate using phones at home, could actually access Internet to form their own support groups, or expand their economic activities. So, I think that is a very important part, where we can bring about policy changes. So, whatever skill development programs that our government is running at the moment should mandatorily include digital literacy programs for women. I think that is a very important aspect, because with economic independence comes that confidence, comes that negotiation power at home, to use mobile phones and use Internet.

Adarsh BU
Right. I agree completely agree with you. Specifically, I agree with what you've told. There are misassumptions, if we give access to the digital, specifically to the women. There's a lot of challenges, though, in rural and remote areas to access the digital, but revealing that even if they have an access, so then other misassumptions thet have around there. So, thanks for sharing that.

I would like to hear much morefrom the Ritushree aspect, especially the transgender woman, and the lawyers. She's the co-founder of the Outcast Collective consulting firm. So, what's your thoughts, Ritushree, can you please share?

Ritushree
Thank you. Good morning to all. First of all, thank you for inviting me to share my thoughts with this beautiful panel. This is a very important topic, when we talk about representation and diversity in Internet, because in today's world, Internet is a massive thing, from shaping the ideas of society, to getting access to everything. From government to private service, you need Internet, and regarding the question: Do you think the Internet is currently inclusive,? Does it represent voices from a diverse community? I would delve into the meta by saying, I represent the Queer community, and as a diversity and inclusion expert, professional, I will say, yes, it represents a community, but it is not inclusive.

If I say, how? Internet is a medium where, in recent years, oppressed communities who have not been represented on mainstream platforms have got a voice. Meena Kotwal is with us in the panel. She runs the Mooknayak, it is a platform for oppressed communities, it became possible only because of Internet. If you see the trans rights movement, where they're opposing the Trans Bill, no mainstream media was showing, but, yes, Internet gave us the power of voice. So, yeah, it can represent diverse community because you will find diverse voices on Internet.

But, is it inclusive? No, because diversity and inclusion are two different things. Diversity means some portion representation of diverse groups, but inclusion means, are they really feeling safe and inclusive on Internet. Coming from a queer community, I would say no, the Internet is not at all inclusive.

Why am I saying so? For queer people, like even more from my journey, my coming out was through Internet. Before coming out to my family and friends, I came out on my social media, posting my photos, interacting with people, who gave me strength, and this is the story of many queer people, who choose to come out on social media first. It should be the safe space. But, if you have seen recently, there were many homophobic / transphobic content are there, people are trolling queer persons, but there is no regulation to report those. If you see a transphobic / homophobic content on YouTube, they're all on Twitter, there is no way to report those, and you cannot take down those videos and tweets, saying that: Okay, so this is not inclusive. Maybe you are giving a platform to the diverse community, or the queer community, but you are not making them feel safe and inclusive.

Another thing. If you go through the Internet on many platforms, either government, or private websites or apps, and everything, most of them ask you gender data when you are opening an account, and when they are asking the gender data they provide the options of binary male or female. They do not provide you the options to choose you know, transgender, non-binary, or anything. Some of them provide the option male, female, and others.

Now, for this year, on Trans Visibility Day, we ran a campaign called Ungender Form, where we asked the companies, government agencies, to provide the options for transgender and non-binary people. Most of them didn't listen to us. Some of them said: Okay, we know this is important, but this is not urgent. And some said: Okay, we have given you the choice of 'others'. And our question was: We are not others, we have an identity. So, this is the thing, Internet does represent diverse voices, but it is not at all inclusive.

Now, the key challenges are, from the perspective of the queer community, gender sensitization. People do not understand, people think that, okay, this is only some jokes or some trolling on queer people on Internet, but they fail to understand that this shaping of idea, this homophobic / transphobic thing you are seeing on Internet, it shapes the idea on ground, and for that, the queer community is facing lots and lots of violence. Recently, three days ago, we we saw a murder of a trans woman in Tamil Nadu. That news, and that is very important, that news made it to the mainstream media. It only was highlighted on social media after Grace Banu posted it, and some Internet platform like [inaudible] highlighted this issue.

So, Internet is the platform where these voices, these news can be brought to the forefront. But the thing is, it is not inclusive, not safe. And no government agency, or private companies, are trying to make it safe for queer people. You know, we have had a few campaigns where we have written to many organizations saying that, you are saying, we are against hate speech and fake news and everything, but see you are not providing us any option to report this transphobic / homophobic thing, that will be content. Nobody listened. They are saying: Okay, you have got this platform you, can say. That is diversity, but you are not making us safe. That is not inclusive. Thank you.

Adarsh BU
Thank you Ritushree, I completely agree with you. So, more concentrate has to be given, and two, the voice has to arise.

Ritushree
Exactly.

Adarsh BU
The voice has to arise. I agree with that one.

I would like to understand much more in the aspect, too, of the languages. There is an expert with deep interest in the Indian languages, and also fashion to solve the complex problems, lead to a try and answer the questions in the language technology space answer. So, I'd like to go with Vidushi Kapoor, what's your thoughts about this one?

Vidushi Kapoor
Good morning, everyone. The first point that I'd like to make is that there is a myth, or a perception, that we have been trying to bust for the longest time, which is that India is not [inaudible] speaking country. Whenever we have tried to speak with the businesses and content

publishers on the Internet, largely we have seen that websites are in English. If we look at some simple statistics, the Constitution recognizes 23 official languages in this country, one of them being English, but the remaining 22 are of Indian origin. The last statistics of the RAI said more than 800 million Internet users in India, but the content in Indian languages of the Internet, all languages combined is barely 1% only. Now, with a population, or a demand of so many individuals for Indian language content and the supply so little, definitely there is a gap and a lack of inclusivity.

A lot of us when we meet with people from other countries, either we travel abroad, or people from abroad come and they interact with us, it's a common observation, although thankfully it is reducing, but it is a common observation: Oh, your English is so good, you can communicate so well in English. How come? India is not really an English speaking country, or English is not really your first language? People outside understand that, probably, English is not so widely spoken, or not such a popular language in this country, but we ourselves sitting in India are not cognizant of that fact.

If we look at just a few years ago, there was a time when there was no Internet. If you look at offline content, more than 95% periodicals, newspapers, magazines, books, movies, TV channels of this country, are in local language. Our key advertising is in local language, we don't have 'Think Cold Drink, Think Coca Cola', we have [inaudible] Coca Cola, all our key taglines, or any messaging that wants to reach the masses is all in local languages. But, as soon as the Internet came into the country, it was entirely in English. You couldn't even properly type and display content in Indian languages, even if there were typing tools, mechanisms, available, the devices did not support it.

It is, over the last 10 To 15 odd years, where rapid change has happened in making sure that all devices support Indian languages. You have typing mechanisms available in smart and non-smartphones, you have UI, UX, is available in Indian languages, and now even apps and websites. The gap has been severe, and there is a lot of work to be done to fix it.

Why is it important to have Internet and technology in Indian languages? If you just start thinking about it, it's so intuitive for all of us for people who are versatile and comfortable in English, our mobile phone and our laptops are something that we cannot even imagine life without any more. We use them for so many things, not just for making calls -- in fact, least of all for making calls. We are barely making calls. Today we're using the Internet for almost everything. We cannot imagine any major function of our life today without the Internet, or without an app, or without Googling something.

But, imagine someone who does not understand English, a smartphone is just a phone for them. They use it to watch videos, listen to songs, or click pictures. Those were what the mobile phone was really used for until languages started coming in. It's a very different world to even imagine. Not just access to information, conveniences, but also equal opportunity, having educational content available in your language, having government services available, education, healthcare, financial services, legal support. This can have huge impacts on rural empowerment, women empowerment, more inclusion, a better level playing field, more employment, more entrepreneurship, GDP growth. It can have vast impacts on all of these areas, which is why it is so critical, so important.

Adarsh BU
I completely agree with that one. The language, especially for the rural area and the remote areas, for the rural empowerment that we talk a lot, but language will come in the first line as a barrier, even though we have a universal acceptance, and all which are working for this, specifically. So, I completely agree with your points.

Next I would like to hear much more about the one who is much more actively working on the Dalit and the woman issues, who is the one journalist from the Dalit, that's Meena Kotwal. So we would like to hear much more, what are the challenges there, and what is the policy, if there's any, and what are the challenges? How can we overcome all those in the Dalit area, and woman perspective? Over to you, Meena Kotwal?

Meena Kotwal
Thank you, Adarsh.

 [Speaking non-English]

Adarsh BU
Sorry to interrupt. So, just some comments, that we have the audience from the global as well, so if you can make use of English that will be good. I understand the language barrier, so those are not good with Hindi, so they are comfortable, please can you switch on?

Meena Kotwal
I am not comfortable with English.

Adarsh BU
Okay, so no problem, please go ahead.

Meena Kotwal

Thank you.

[Speaks non-English]

Adarsh BU

Completely accurate. So, in rural aspects, we need to consider them as well, for the discussions. I completely agree with you. Thank you so much for sharing your thoughts.

I would like to grab Shruti Shreya, who is the one much more included with intermediary liability, content moderation, and freedom of expression. That's much more a content picture. I would like to hear from you, Shruti Shreya, what's your thoughts about this. It's over to you?

Shruti Shreya

Hi, Adarsh. Thanks to everybody, Purnima, Brinda, and the entire team for inviting me here. After listening to the views of all my other fellow panelists, I certainly agree with most of the opinions that they've shared, and I must say that most of the things that needs to be covered, they've covered, but, in my opinion, and I would just like to give these things a little more different perspective, and just add value to a little more meaning, and a little more new ideas to what has already been talked about.

We talked about how the challenges persisting for women, the challenges persisting for LGBTQ community, and as well as the language barriers that exist. My opinion, and in addition to what has already been discussed as the reason for this challenge, and the reason which is hampering the inclusive nature of the Internet, is the safety challenges that exist on the Internet, be it the trolls, be it the spams, the cyberbullying, all these things are something which is greatly impacting all these marginalized communities, be it women, be it the LGBTQ+ communities. There are multiple researchs which show that women are trolled much more than any other community, and the same holds true for the LGBTQ+ people.

Now, as it was rightly pointed out, it's not very easy for people from the LGBTQ+ community to come out in a physical space, so they use the anonymity which is provided by the Internet to express themselves freely, to voice their opinions. However, the acceptance rate is still minimal, even on the Internet. The Internet has the responsibility to empower these communities, so even they are accepted in the physical space. But, if the Internet is being blocked, this responsibility of the Internet is not being fulfilled properly, given the fact that the trolls, the different kinds of

bullying, that takes place on the Internet anytime a person of these communities comes out and expresses himself or herself properly, is a challenge which is faced.

Now the impact of these challenges on these communities is another important thing. Women who are working as entrepreneurs on the online space, women who use Internet as a means of their livelihood, journalists, human rights workers, whistleblowers, who come from the women community, they have to face immense challenges, and the challenge is greater as compared to men. We need to understand the safety threat which is there is one of the key reasons which is hampering, not just the economic welfare of women, given that they are not able to exercise their right to livelihood well, but also their socio economic progress, where they are not able to tackle the challenges of the fiscal space as well as they could have, if the Internet would have given them a lot more empowerment. Internet has definitely given them more space, but there is a long way to go before it can actually help women and LGBTQ+ community people realize their true potentials.

Coming to the language barriers that exist, one of the key challenges is the data gaps which exist, like whatever, the AI ML technologies, the data that is collected for formulation of these technologies itself is not inclusive. Many of the forms of the government still have just two genders, whether it is male or female, they do not even give the option of a third gender there. So, we are just losing on that kind of data during the creation of the algorithms. And then if the processing and the creation of the data is not inclusive, then we cannot even think that the technology that has been developed will be inclusive. Ensuring, getting more technology, more inclusive nature of data, as well as thinking about the peculiar safety challenges of all these marginalized communities, is something which we are lacking on, and which we really need to more effectively and collaboratively work towards, to ensure that we are able to tackle.

Adarsh BU
I completely agree with that point. Specifically, where Internet is the major one, where we can't come up front, and the Internet is the space to express. There is Article 19a from the Indian government, Article 19, it's right to freedom of speech and expression in the Internet. So, I think we are missing up there. A lot of awareness need to be bring up, so we need to work on to bring up the awareness among everyone about this one.

I would like to hear from Sameer Nair. Sameer Nair is the one doing amazing work for the Youth4Jobs Foundation, so we are focusing on skilling and linking less educated youth, and with disabilities as well, in the [inaudible] across India, so we'd like to know much much more from Youth4Jobs Foundation, in the perspective of where the disabilities that are facing the issue, are

we considering them for the discussions? Are we making the Internet feasible for them? So, please share your thoughts on that.

Sameer Nair

Thanks, Adarsh. Thanks so much for inviting me to this beautiful discussion on digital inclusion. Before I get into the answering the questions put across, I will take a minute to talk about my organization which I'm representing. I represent an organization called Youth4Jobs Foundation, which works exclusively for people with disabilities across India. We work with both less educated and educated youth, centered in both urban and rural areas, working with all genders across, from the age group of 18 to 40+. The reason I thought I should tell this, so that my perspective on these questions would be understood by others, since I'm representing entire people with disability community across India.

Answering the question, do you think Internet is currently inclusive? We should look at two aspects of it. One is pre-pandemic, pre-COVID, and post-COVID. Currently, we still are under the COVID, and one thing we should realize is, there has been a lot of optimism where you have various online platforms, the usage of Google, the Zoom etc have gone up compared to pre- and post-pandemic. So, that gives a lot of optimism that there is a digital increment happening from pre-COVID days to the post-COVID days. However, saying this, we also have seen several technological advancements that made technology now seemingly fit into our lives. There are people who were not using Zoom, currently use everything zoom. People who felt that digital cannot be used in every area, see digital being used. That's a good improvement and good [inaudible] what we have done.

Inside our classroom training programs, pre-pandemic, we have felt that we could not make people with disability get into the digital platform, and what we have done as post-COVID, the entire training program is online. So, people are using GMail, WhatsApp, LMS platform, to get into this training program. So, it is an encouragement to see that people are using digital.

But, having said this, meaningful and inclusive access still lags behind. Most of the platforms still are not meaningful, still are not inclusive for people with disabilities, which we need to consider when developing such platforms, to ensure that people with disabilities, almost 21 types of people with disabilities are there, at least bare minimum, people with disabilities can use these platforms.

The other aspects? As I mentioned, we also work focusing on rural areas. One of the things which I see is, despite great progress and Internet adoption, success is not equally distributed. People with disabilities in urban areas have far greater access, compared to the people with disabilities in

the rural areas, not to say about women with disabilities in rural areas, they have been the most affected, and there is only slow progress in terms of Internet adoption.

Other challenges, especially for people with disabilities? If I can do so, I can divide into five aspects of it. One key challenge being the urban and rural divide, which is there across India, you will see that in any area of spectrum. Second is the gender gap, in any any area, rural or semi-rural, urban or semi-open, you will see this gender gap. Income disparity, even if I want to purchase a basic smartphone at the rural area, versus the income disparity, you'll see technology being not being much used, even though there's some scope of using it. Income disparity plays a major hurdle in terms of making this digital inclusion. Literacy. As I said, people with disabilitieshave more of literacy related problems. I'm talking about generic literacy, not to talk about digital literacy, which needs to be picked up among the people with disabilities. Last, but not the least, affordability, even if you think the small packages of 30 rupees, 50 rupees, are affordable, unfortunately, people with disabilities from rural areas cannot afford that. So, making the entire spectrum of Internet accessible and affordable for people with disabilities would ensure more and more people with disabilities are part of this digital inclusion.

Now, what do we need to do first, for the challenges? The foremost thing, what I feel, is there has to be an effective rural Internet policy, which focuses on the gender as well as people with disability into it, especially people with disability from the female gender and third gender as such. And also this policy should be tractable, if you can't tractable, and attract people to it, I think it will never work. We should also build a framework that enhances digital and financial literacy. I think both digital and financial literacy go hand in hand, we can't see in an isolation. Any framework will have both digital and financial literacy built in. Last but not the least, I think the content should be in the regional languages, apart from the local languages, which should help people with disability coming from the rural areas with less educated background, which are predominantly more among people in the disability community.

As I mentioned earlier, we also need to make a cost effective, affordable product which can be used by the rural areas, as such. And last, if you have to make the entire digital inclusive, I think more should come from the companies where people have, and if you look at most of the companies including the website, the technology, the platforms that they used, arenot still inclusive. Once they start doing it, more and more people would obviously become digital savvy, and help people with disability get included in it. Thanks Adarsh, for giving me this opportunity.

Adarsh BU

Most welcome, Sameer Nair. For your words. I completely agree lot of our policies will come up. So, just for a [inaudible], the time of the policy that comes up, there will be a lot of words, but we have seen the policies have failed for an execution. So, it has to begin to execute, and the policy even with implementation not only for the urban and the rural, with what you have mentioned with respect to the rural women and the rural disabilities persons, where they can raise their voice, and that must be considered as well, really wonderful thoughts on that one.

You mentioned about technology, emerging technologies are there. So, we have an interesting one more panelist, Bhuvana Meenakshi, who is the woman in tech community in India? Let's hear from Bhuvana regarding this one, what's your thoughts and how the tech will be utilized. Over to you.

Bhuvana Meenakshi

Thanks Adarsh, and also, it's been really great to be part of the panel, with your thoughts and very valid opinions on this specific topic. To just begin with, understanding of the Internet that has been evolved, I have read this book, by name, 'Broadband' by Claire Evans. This book has been a very good eye opener for me as well to understand how women create created online, they created the Internet space, and how women have been part of indigenous software systems, and software, and the complex hardware as well. And how this thought was being suppressed.

Back in the 19th century, where it all started with Ada Lovelace, we all know that how the analytical engine systems, and how complex the evolution of even programming and everything got started with women, and also to the creation of the first TCP/IP, and then also the modern video games. There has been consistently the participation of women in all of these developments of the modern technologies. But there's also the fact that, post World War Two, where this representation slowly moved down for reasons of getting into a more male dominated society, and then that's, that's related to where in the 21st century, women had to raise out their voices, to get their rights to get back into that form of you know, understanding that they are they being contributing into the presentation of development of these spaces of digital access as well. So, this report from the Internet and Mobile Association of India, which gives a survey from 2019, where [inaudible] says there's this gender distribution across -- new female entering into Internet is just like 35%, and that among which the rural women is just the participation of 40% from various geographies, just from India. So, 40% or 30% of women who've been trying to be trying to access the Internet, they definitely have found challenges, and, of course, that is not restricted to just the accessibility to the online space, but it's also accessibility to the hardware.

And along with that, comes the literacy to access it. What I wanted to emphasize here is more of the psychological base challenges that comes along with expressing certain expressions of thought. I present from the neurodiverse community, and if neurodiversity is a new term here, then I am just trying to give definition of what diversity is, so it is a diversity of human brains, minds, that has an infinite variation in neurocognitive functioning within our species. The individuals who are part of the neuro-diverse community, we'll call this neuro divergence. Creating an inclusive space for the neuro divergence has been way further to what we have in systems for the PWD. The PWD in itself, the policies that we have in India are very restrictive to the type of spectrum of disability that's actually been represented, but then my opinion is that there's way more to what mental disability could be represented in, and also the people who fall in various diverse notions of what you call as neuro diverse.

This concept of late has been growing a little. It could be either in the offline space, or it's very nascent to the online space, and people from neurodiverse communities are still trying to find ways, and especially in the global South, where there's much less awareness about what does this overall thing mean, and how people need to understand and accept these factors is also a point of concern that I want to represent. here.

Also, the presentation to the open access Internet for various diverse communities is still a full [inaudible] policy, or a full inclusive online process, in terms of various needs, and in terms of being now thrown into situations of like only dependent on virtual systems, is still a need. To some of my points, I'm more interested to find how open access Internet can present various communities and also help marginalized groups. It's not about the presentation online, but also, as everyone already mentioned, also about like, how to give that rights to [inaudible].

Adarsh BU
Thank you, Bhuvana. I completely agree with you. It's not like an open access to an Internet, so we need to include them for the discussion, we need to answer their points in all the aspects. I completely agree with that one. Thank you so much for your input.

In the continuation, I would like to hear from much more with very much passion about about the technology. Technology for good has been driving products, and also focusing on building a solution, that's very interesting to hear from, on low income, low literacy populations in India. That is Savita Muley, my ideas to you. So, over to you.

Savita Muley

Thank you, Adarsh. Hello everyone, and thank you for having me here as part of a very enriching discussion, I think [inaudible] very different perspectives, each one, looking at the same problem with a different lens. I'll give a quick round about of Haqdarshak, what we do as a company, to frame as similar to what Sameer tried to do, to frame my opinions here, and the context from which I speak on this topic. Haqdarshak is a [inaudible] old social enterprise, [inaudible] organization with a vision mission to enable access to government welfare for citizens and micro businesses in India. In the last five years, we have worked in 24 states, represented in 24 states, in India. We have [inaudible] more than 13,000 crores of benefits to more than 1.2 million Indians, and microbusinesses in the last several years of our operations. Alaska, so close to six years, we have been able to impact about 2 million people variable tempo welfare programs for the basic identity documentation. [inaudible] last mile agents that we call 'Haqdarshaks' to be wise, and support communities that they are serving.

Speaking about inclusivity on the Internet, I can't stand back and talk about inclusion, there. I mean, if you see the Internet, in the larger history of mankind, has been a very recent phenomenon. A 25 year old technology, it's extremely young, and in its early years, and, as with all technology, it mirrors the reality. In our real world we are far away from being a very inclusive society. A lot of my fellow panelists talk about restrictions and constraints of how mainstream media has afected those communities. Platforms are available, or not available, in the mainstream media, and mainstream businesses, these different voices. With that context, the pace at which Internet has created openness and inclusion for different opinions and voices is extremely fast. In the advances since the advent of an Internet like platform, to have today a scenario where free voice is represented. Ritushree very rightly pointed out, there is representation, but is it safe, is it inclusive? There is a lot of work to be done.

Just like with all other technological advancements, I think as the Internet grows, as the usage of Internet grows, as more voices and more forums like this evolve, I think that the inclusion index is going to improve. I'll talk a little bit about what I mean by inclusion [inaudible], access which includes things like affordability [inaudible]. The other aspect is in terms of trust and safety. I have access to it but do I trust it enough, like that it's safe using it? Third most important thing is, do I have a way to meaningfully utilize the Internet for my life and my business? As an individual, I have access, but am I consuming just videos, or am I making some of that information? The positive that the Internet is opening up for me. I think inclusion has been looked at from all three aspects, and I think we have a long way to go in terms of addressing each of these separately, in terms of affordabily, trust and safety, meaningful content, relevant content, awareness and education about how to utilize the Internet. I think there's a lot of work to be done. as a as a solution going forward.

What I see shaping up in the larger ecosystem is really three pronged. I see three fights from which this work has to happen. I look at it as a triangle to define the framework. One node is governments and regulatory bodies, whose job is not to solve the problem, but to create an environment. Solutions can evolve, and that comes from enabling a good infrastructure, be it in terms of physical infrastructure, the regulatory infrastructure, economic infrastructure, in terms of business policies, etc.

Second front comes to it from the private sector, the private sector has a very big role to play. As a classic example, last five years what we've seen, especially in India, with the introduction of [inaudible] platform, the kind of inclusion that you have seen, the kind of adoption of Internet -- that it is meaningful or not is a moot point -- but the fact that more people are now accessing the Internet, because of single private companies, [inaudible], is a great example of the power of what the private sector can achieve.

The third part is civil society organizations, philanthropies, think tanks, research organizations, grassroot organizations, nonprofits. I think a lot of work is already happening. [inaudible] in social space. We work with a lot of ecosystem players, including state governments, including philanthropies and think tanks, even grassroot organizations, people who are working at a village level on the ground, along with our Haqdarshak agents to solve various problems. Civil society organizations have the responsibility to tackle, not necessarily development of the problem, but bringing out voices, opinions and perspectives from the ground, bringing out data, bringing out new thinking, diverse thinking.

I think this panel represents a lot of that kind of opinion, and that type of voice, which is going to be very important input to the other two fronts. Government needs to hear this be able to formulate policies. Private sector needs to hear this to know what kind of solutions are needed. I can't solve a problem if I don't know the extent and the nature of the problem. So, solution building has to happen on all three fronts. I think these three fronts have to work together, there cannot be a one versus the other approach, there cannot be this is my space and this is your space approach. I think a collaborative approach is going to help fasten the pace of inclusion. There is a great [inaudible], it's just a matter of investing the right resources [inaudible]. But forums like this, I think this this is the kind of forum that needs to be planted more for this to come true.

Adarsh BU

Thank you so much for all your insights, I completely agree. Thank you for sharing the three aspects which need to be considered, it could be looking for affordability, safety, awareness. and all. That's a great insight, or that you give where we have to concentrate much more, and where we are lagging, specifically, to bring up the inclusion in the Internet aspects.

It was a wonderful talks section. I'm getting a lot of information from the very well experienced panelists today. We are all happy for that. Now it's time to open the floor to give an opportunity to our audience to ask questions. Letet me check with that. Brinda, do we have time to take up the questions?

Brinda Dash

Yes, Adarsh, we have five minutes to take up some questions from the audience. We have one from Nirosha, I'm going to go back and paste the question so that we can take a look at it. Give me a minute.

Adarsh BU

Meanwhile, there is a question from [inaudible], what policy measures can be taken to bridge that gender digital divide gap in a country like India?

Shruti Shreya

Firstly, this is a very good question. I think legal and policy solutions and devising sustainable legal and policy frameworks is very important to have, to combat these challenges and ensuring inclusive space. Most importantly these inclusive legal and policy frameworks can come from the collaborative efforts of the government, the platforms themselves, and the civil society. The platforms and the civil society needs to consistently give their feedback to the government with respect to where the policies are lacking, where the laws are lacking, and how can these laws and policies be made more inclusive. Now, we saw that India is in the final stages of enacting its data protection law, and here for the last two years, since the bill was with the JPC, and the JPC was working on its set of recommendations, there were a series of extensive consultations with all the different stakeholders in the ecosystem. Many of these recommendations have been incorporated in the report, some have not been incorporated.

At least having that open pathway, where everybody can voice their opinion, is very important, and more, it's important that in any legal or policy making process, there is adequate representation of all communities. Even now we see that the representation from women and LGBTQ+ community in our parliament, or even our state level legislatures is very less, or,

importantly, the specialized committees that are framed under different ministries, be it the MeitY, be it the [inaudible], be it any other ministry for that matter. We need to ensure that any particular specialized committee which is working on any specialized issue, in addition to the technical experts, if it is related to Internet, if it's related to data, if it's related to online safety, it's important that there is representation from the technical community, so that they can understand the challenges there, and, as well, there is representation from the different social communities, so that different kinds of social voices are heard.

Like we saw in the IP rules of 2021, there has been the mandate of enabling traceability on encrypted platforms for knowing who's been the first sender. There has been a lot of uproar in the civil society that this is a very technically infeasible measure, which is going to lead to undermining the privacy of all the citizens. Here the technical community needs to be heard. We need to consult professors from the IIT, we need to consult the technologists, that is it actually possible to have traceability of encrypted platforms. Similarly, understanding the perspective of journalists, women, and how important that encryption enable anonymity is for them.

Not just for the government, but also for the platforms. The community guidelines that they come up with, the terms of service of the platforms, according to which they exercise what content is flagged, who's supposed to be blocked all of that, they need to ensure that there is consistent feedback on the community guidelines, their terms of service. They publish frequent reports, they are coming up with compliance reports in the adherence with the IP rules, but it's important that these transparency and compliance reports are made more nuanced, on a more robust basis, what recommendations is coming.

Right now, the transparency reports of all the intermediaries in India only contain the data which is related to the content that has been taken down through proactive monitoring or user grievance, through the grievance redressing mechanism where the users file complaints. Government requests, basis on which takedown is done, which is one of the most prominent ones, that data is not available in the compliance reports. The law enforcement agencies is demanding takedown of particular kind of content. The platforms are not publishing that in India, and this is in not in accordance with what is there in the Santa Clara principles.

The Santa Clara principles are considered the global soft laws in content moderation, they've just come up with Santa Clara 2.0. They have given nuanced procedures with respect to how content moderation should take place. It's important that the platforms adhere to these policies, they ensure that their compliance reports are uniform across jurisdictions. It's seen that in lesser advantageous countries like Africa and other regions, the compliance reports are not that robust,

because people lack awareness, people lack that kind of literacy, and there is not so much activism. It's important that it's being called out, and frequent feedback is given to the platforms as well as the government, so that we ensure that there is appropriate level of accountability and transparency on the part of all these stakeholders, and we can have inclusive frameworks, be it policy or legal.

Adarsh BU

Thank you so much for taking up and giving us for that. Our next question: Are there any legal frameworks to protect the rights of digital inclusions in India? This question is from Niroja. I would like to check with Ritushree. Ritushree is a queer rights activist, so what's your thought, Ritushree, on this question?

Ritushree

Now, for the inclusion of diversity, this whole diversity of inclusion, in India, not only on Internet, but also in corporates and everywhere, it is a very new concept. We were trained to discriminate, we are not trained to include people. There is no such inclusion policy from the governament, there are some regulations, or something, but you cannot call it inclusive policies, which indeed the requirement, if you see, not only for Internet, but also for every sector like the corporate and everywhere, you need a policy of inclusion.

Now, as I said earlier, when we say inclusion, people say increase percentage of diversity is inclusion. No. Inclusion means the sense of belongingness an oppressed community feel at the place, at a space. Right now, we are talking about the Internet. We always say that, okay, government will do, the civil society will do, or the private parties will do, but it has to come from the top. Even during, in the [inaudible], when we are making policy for the corporates, he always says that the mission statement, the inclusion policy has to come from the top. Here the government has to take the initiative.

But, sadly, all these things, of inclusion and safety and belongingness, never find any place in government policies. That is the sad part. But yes, we need a strong policy, not only for the queer people, or the oppressed community. Someone in the panel, I am extremely sorry i didn't get the name who said this, but the woman, cisgender woman, transgender woman, the queers, they are very vulnerable. The way they're being trolled, the way even their photos have been auctioned on Internet, but if you want to complain, or file, you have to go through this IPCC thing, the traditional way. There is no specific law to come down on it, and right now the Internet is spreading across the world like a bushfire. Everything is on Internet, people are spending more time on Internet than in their office or family.

You need to regulate this, because this is now at the initial stage, if we are not regulating this, we are not making any policy, then situations will be devastating in future.

Adarsh BU

That's good to know. So now I would like to hear from every panel member some closing remarks, and very short, can be one minute of time. We don't have a lot of time now, we're already out of time.. .

Srinivasa Reddy Gurram

Adarsh, I want to add a few points to know the policy perspective. There are policies that are happening, but they are not out to the public. I think internally they are handling that now, giving some of the organizations to implement, like no feedback, and especially in the police. There are cyber cells that they have opened. and they are taking all the cyber cases into those cells. Example, Cyberabad Security Council. They are one of the nonprofit organization associated with the police, and the task force on the policies, and now they are doing a lot of things. The CyberSense as well.

I think this is one point of contact that we can make, maybe associate with them, and understand, and now more push the digital, or the cyber cases, to create the awareness and all that, in association with the Cyberabad Security Council, and as well as the C-DAC, Center for Development at Advanced Computing. These are the people who are now creating more on the awareness, of the security awareness , even many of the things that they are doing in the backend, but no, it is not coming to the public.

I think this is what actually we'll have to associate with these two associations, especially Cyberabad Security Council, as well as the C-DAC, which are the implementers , as the developers. These people are developing without knowing the social consciousness, or maybe sometimes it is very difficult to know, understand, what is the requirement of the society. That is where we, all people, need to provide some inputs to them when developing such tools. The Cyberabad Security Council are taking forward some of the initiatives with the police. I think this is where we will have to involve, and give our inputs, so that they can better implement whatever policies that they are running internally, which are not open everywhere, because of many reasons.

We know what all the things are happening across the globe. Every country has their own way of handling the things,

Brinda Dash

I would request you kindly take your comment to the chat box please. We are running out of time. Thank you.

Adarsh BU

We are running out of time. Thank you for your comments. Shruti, would you like to add something here?

Shruti Shreya

I agree with what we just heard, and it was more so in pursuance of the same, that it's not that we do not have any laws and policies, but the most important challenge is that we do not have targeted policies, and more importantly, there is not appropriate implementation of the existing laws and policies. There exist under the POCSO rules, we have everything related to child sexual abuse material, its proliferation is a crime, and there is hardcore punishments laid down to track these criminals, as well as to prosecute them. But we see that, despite this being there, there was a report which said that out of 15,000 CSAM complaints made to the NCRB, only 15 are converted into FIRs.

This implementation gap is the most important challenge. We have laws, we have some policies, the MeitY [inaudible] is consistently working towards more inclusive policies, but still the implementation is where we are lagging, and that is something we need to more importantly take care of.

Adarsh BU

Yes. Thank you for that. And Ritushree, if you want to add something.

Ritushree

As I said about policy and everything, yes, we have some policies, but we have to understand this. Inclusion doesn't mean safety only, inclusion is much more than that. If you are only making policies to counter any attack, or any crime, on any oppressed or lesser represented community on Internet, that is not inclusive, inclusion is much more than that, inclusion is belongingness, when you feel like, okay, I belong to this space.

As my fellow speaker said, yes, there are laws to counter all these crimes and everything, but what I what I would like to say is, as yet there is no policy as such to make it inclusive, to make people feel belongingness. As I said, the gender data, we do not have any policy or rule which mandates

every company, or every platform, to say you have to provide gender data form, not only in binary, but in transgender, non-binary. That's an example of what is inclusiveness and belongingness?

Adarsh BU
For sure. Thank you so much, Ridushree for sharing. We are trying to take the short ending remarks from other speakers, but due to the time we are dropping that one.

Purnima, what's next? Are we going to do the group photo, and then the word of thank?.

Purnima Tiwari
You can take a quick picture. If everybody can turn the camera on, the speakers, the audience, we would really love to have one picture of this particular session.

Smile everyone. It's great to see you here.

So, thank you Adarsh. It was really lovely to have everybody on board today. I would like to thank all of the speakers, to actually take their time out for us. and grace us with their presence. It has been already discussed in such lengths and breadth that we have this particular Dynamic Coalition in the Internet Governance Forum, which talks about how access to Internet, it's a powerful right, this particular Dynamic Coalition on Internet Policies and Rights was introduced in 2009, and, in particularly, you know, they gave off 10 rights there, and accessibility and diversity were addressed as the right that any digital users would have. To conclude my thoughts here, digital inclusion is also about creating meanings, indeed, for everybody.

With this, I would like to conclude this particular session. I would like to thank our lovely speakers. Thank you for giving us such an interesting session. I would like to thank the organizers quickly, Internet Society Hyderabad, Internet Society Chapter, Youth IGF, [inaudible] , Adarsh, and Brinda, obviously. So, thank you everybody for gracing us with your presence. Have a lovely day ahead.

Adarsh BU
Thank you.